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## Schooling and lifelong learning. The role of transversal key competences

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### Abstract

The purpose of this paper is to consider the process of developing transversal key competences to achieve long term goals such as citizenship, social cohesion and lifelong learning.

I examine the role that key competences play in the recent reformed school curricula in South Tyrol, a trilingual and tricultural province in northern Italy that has just designed the curricula of primary and secondary school according to the *Recommendation of the European Parliament and of the Council on key competences for lifelong learning* (COM, 2006) and with the goal of rethinking the place and function of schools in the community.

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### 1. Introduction

This paper presents initial findings from a research project conducted at an Italian-speaking educational institution that includes kindergarten, primary school, middle school and secondary school. The research outlines an implementation process of recently reformed curriculum in South Tyrol that pays particular attention to transversal competences. Curriculum is a fundamental matter for the effectiveness of education (Glatthorn, Boschee, & Whitehead, 2006). The new curriculum in South Tyrol foregrounds and promotes skills, abilities, behaviours and competences and emphasises the cross-curricular dimension which provides important processes of learning that provide people with opportunities for self-fulfilment, access to lifelong and -wide learning and social inclusion in the context of solidarity and sustainability.

My research project aims to add to transversal competences education literature by looking at a case study of a transversal key competencies curriculum implementation process. The main purpose of this case study is to examine curriculum implementation and to deepen the understanding of the collaborative process among the participants of the school community.

The first finding of the research shows that promoting cross-curricular competences requires that teachers, pupils and the involved people at school work in close collaboration and cross the boundaries of traditional subjects. Teachers need to work together in order to develop the school's transversal competences curriculum and they need to discuss and exchange information about learning environments and agency-partnerships.

My aim is to look more in depth into the role of the community in the building of learning networks and to investigate the relationship between the promotion of transversal competences and

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- a) the structure: 1) internal relationships to classes and school (including pupils, teachers and the school system), 2) relationships internal / external (with parents), and 3) the relationship among the stakeholders and the educational organisations of the local area;
- b) the establishment (by teachers, principals, parents, students) of learning-, interaction-, and communication networks.

## 2. Literature review

There is some vagueness in the use of notions such as competence. Terms such as competence, competency, skill, capacity and, capability have different meanings but are sometimes regarded as very similar. In many countries, it is difficult to make a clear distinction between skills and competences (Gordon, 2010).

A first step in my research project was to present how the European Framework defines the five cross-curricular competences (Annex of the Recommendation of the European Parliament and of the Council, 18 December 2006): digital competences; learning to learn; social and civic competences; sense of initiative and entrepreneurship and; cultural awareness and expression. Transversal competences are subject-independent and cross-curricular. They are related to the better management of one's own learning, as well as social and interpersonal relations and communication and transversal competences reflect the general shift in emphasis from teaching to learning (Eurydice, 2012).

My research aims to consider the transversal nature of key competences, defined as critical thinking, problem solving, decision-making processes, organisation building, reflexivity and empathic and social behaviour.

A second step is to define how the transversal competences are integrated in the curriculum in South Tyrol and which approaches and strategies are chosen to support the implementation of these competences. The Provincial Indications for the Definition of Curricula of the Autonomous Province of Bozen-Bolzano came into force in July 2009. This document is a binding framework for the definition of new curricula and gives an important space to the promotion and development of transversal key competences with reference to the indications of the European Parliament and of the Council on key competences for lifelong learning. It focuses on transversal competences with the appropriate skills, attitudes and knowledge as a basis for lifelong learning and for effective life management. Primary and secondary schools in the province of Bozen-Bolzano are therefore among the first in Italy to have chosen transversal key competences as the criterion for structuring the curriculum and introducing formative assessment of progressive levels of these competences. The competences are: learning and planning; communication and cooperation; competence to identify connections and relationships and to solve problems; social and civic competences; competence in using information technology and media and; cultural and intercultural competence. The educational principles that inspire the transversal key competences curriculum refer to the learning biographies of pupils in individual learning processes, active and exploratory responsibility, to a climate of trust and respect in the classroom, an efficient organisation of learning environments and work and the methodological diversity.

The focus on transversal competences seems to involve an inevitable reduction in declarative knowledge and the foundation of new contexts and learning experiences. It emphasises the intentionality of teaching/learning and higher transferability in different fields and, therefore, the awareness of the possibility of conversion of acquired competences into the capacity for action. Schools promote values for social cooperation and bridge different social networks.

The promotion of transversal key competences requires a variety of teaching methods and a new organisation of learning that encourage team work and shared learning and endorse learning environments that support social capital with links across social groups and agencies. Participated learning is also an activity with a high grade of social capital (Mortari, 2007) and it is interesting to identify the conditions, assumptions and practices which generate supportive, collaborative and pro-social thought, will and resources. The social capital is thus presented as an internal element of schools or as a connection with the local communities. The social capital is both the result and cause of the organisational culture and education in schools and should be studied in relation to stakeholders (pupils, teachers, school administrators) and more or less formal networks between school and community.

I intend to connect my research with Vygotsky's sociocultural theory of human learning that describes learning

as a social process and the origination of human intelligence in society or culture. The major theme of Vygotsky's theoretical framework is that social interaction plays a fundamental role in the development of cognition:

Every function in the child's cultural development appears twice: first, on the social level, and later, on the individual level; first, between people (interpsychological) and then inside the child (intrapsychological).

This applies equally to voluntary attention, to logical memory, and to the formation of concepts. All the higher functions originate as actual relationships between individuals. (Vygotsky, 1978, p. 57)

I also intend to connect transversal competences with the capabilities approach of Martha Nussbaum, who developed and built the first idea of Amartya Sen. The capabilities approach arises as a method and perspective focusing on many questions of political and social theory (disadvantage, the gender question, disability, aging, the concept of care, education, etc.): "[...] the approach takes each person as an end, asking not just about the total or average well-being but about the opportunities available to each person" (Nussbaum, 2011, p. 18). This approach goes beyond the question of the quality of school or the quantity/quality of resources, but takes into account the different possibilities of people being able to convert resources and services into action. The concept of capacity refers to the possibilities to pursue meaningful life paths. It is not a concept of merely instrumental value but an essential tool to enable people to control their future. An education system that, according to Nussbaum, shall provide basic skills is not only the starting point for progress and social development but also supports social justice for disadvantaged people in education. Finally I refer to studies that consider the learning experience as a shared experience, such as community in the sense that people share the learning process; they support each other and develop a kind of collective responsibility (Bereiter & Scardamalia, 1996). This model points out the possibility of structuring the school as a community of research that produces knowledge and competences for its members and for the social community. The school develops a community of practice in which there are experiential educational contexts, where social practices are considered generative (Lave and Wenger, 1991).

### 3. Research methodology

Among the paradigms of reference I refer to is a phenomenological conception of reality that is built and negotiated between different subjects. Pedagogical reflection needs to keep in mind the complexity of educational problems and the need to overcome the positivist model through more intensive and serious qualitative methodologies that are able to capture aspects which are not quantified or formalized and follow complex processes and dynamics (Demetrio, 1992, Mantovani 1998, Ceconi 2002).

The value of qualitative research can be identified with attention to individual cases that appear abandoned and isolated in their authenticity and individuality in relation to individuals and social contexts (Merriam, 1998) and that are emblematic of the complexity of educational always changing phenomena.

The research methodology for this project was also guided by the qualitative research paradigm. The definition of qualitative research is not always easy to formulate because this type of research involves various forms (naturalistic inquiry, field studies, ethnographic observations, case studies). Merriam proposes a definition that outlines the most important characteristics of qualitative research:

The following four characteristics are identified by most as key to understanding the nature of qualitative research: the focus is on process, understanding and meaning; the researcher is the primary instrument of data collection and analysis; the process is inductive; and the product is richly descriptive. (Merriam, 2009, p. 14)

Phenomenological style is what interprets the naturalistic approach of going into the field without preconceived theories and implements the principle of contextualization that is to build theory from the context with a focus on quality which things appear. Therefore it is the phenomenology that makes sense to a research approach that has as its object the complex phenomenon of the educational relationships (Mortari, 2007).

#### 4. Methods and techniques of data collection

My research is based on a case study. In education, case studies have been used in particular to study programmes and initiatives for innovation in the curriculum, for which it is necessary to consider complex situations, determined by many factors and which are highly dependent on the specific context in which they develop.

Stake defines a case study as “an empirical inquiry that investigates a contemporary phenomenon within its real-life context, especially when boundaries between phenomenon and context are not clearly evident” (Yin, 2003, p. 13). The case study is particularistic, descriptive and heuristic.

This institute was chosen because it promotes the establishment of a school community; in fact, it has the primary aim of favouring the design and implementation of a vertically-centred curriculum based on skills rather than only on content and one which aims to promote progressive cognitive and behavioural autonomy of pupils in social attitudes. The school offers a linguistically mixed environment.

The study uses different types of data collection for qualitative studies: shadowing; in-depth interviews and; document analysis.

“Shadowing is a research technique that involves a researcher closely following a member of an organisation over an extended period of time” (McDonald, 2005, 457). The observation, in the form of shadowing, permits the use of the most emotional and unconscious part of the researcher and that of the person shadowed. Shadowing also offers, through the narrative, a way to “tell the data” which can give the perception of complexity and a multi-voice context (Sclavi, 2005).

The in-depth interview can be defined as a face-to-face meeting that takes place in order to understand the interviewee’s perspectives in relation to their experiences.

Document analysis means the systematic and careful examination of documents such as curricula and project reports in order to identify patterns, provide a preliminary study for an interview, a shadowing or an observation checklist, or to gain insight into an instructional approach (Merriam, 2009).

#### 5. Findings and Conclusion

The introduction and implementation of transversal key competences involve great challenges: new teaching methods; new relationships between stakeholders; a new school organisation; approaches to learning by doing and; a network structure.

The initial findings draw a very rich network of relationships between school and local community. The first findings that emerged were:

- the construction of a shared vision that was co-constructed by the school curriculum team members. The team organised a “community of practice”;
- collaboration among the community members and the inter-agency partnerships created a shared vision and common values;
- the active involvement of parents in supportive programmes (i.e. holiday activities);
- engagement with the wider community (banks, churches or other religious institutions, libraries, police, cultural institutions, civic organisations, social service agencies) in order to promote social inclusion and;
- parents and teachers perceive the experience of collaborations and openness as opportunities for students to become more effective citizens.

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